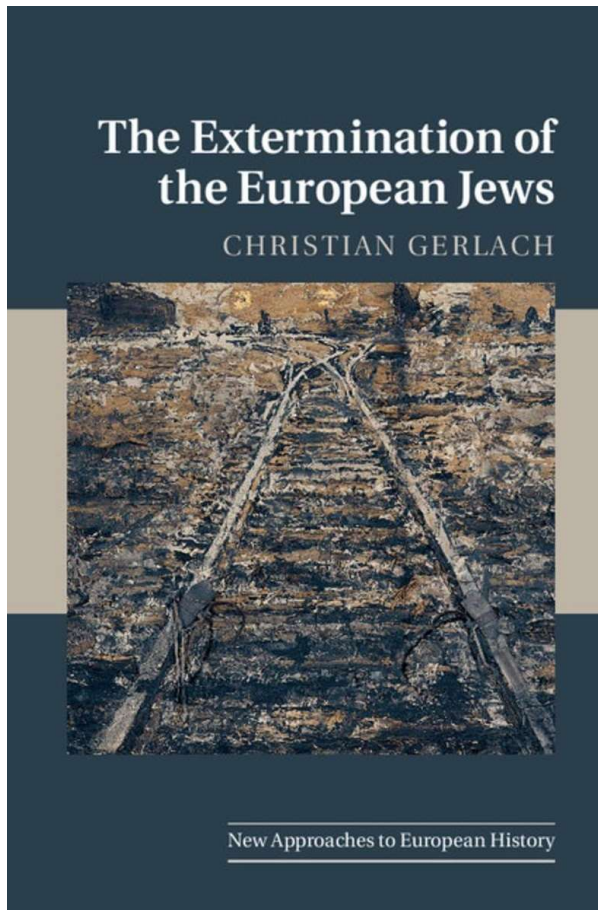


Christian Gerlach's *The Extermination of the European Jews*

[Panagiotis Heliotis](#)



This time we will take on the latest comprehensive elaboration on the Holocaust written by a mainstream historian: *The Extermination of the European Jews* (Cambridge University Press, 2016) by German historian Christian Gerlach, professor of modern history at the University of Bern and associate editor of the *Journal of Genocide Research*. The book's content is organized as follows:

1. Introduction

Part I: Persecution by Germans

2. Before 1933

3. From enforced emigration to territorial schemes: 1933–41

4. From mass murder to comprehensive annihilation: 1941–42

5. Extending mass destruction: 1942–45

6. Structures and agents of violence

Part II: Logics of persecution

7. Racism and anti-Jewish thought

8. Forced labor, German violence and Jews

9. Hunger policies and mass murder
10. The economics of separation, expropriation, crowding and removal
11. Fighting resistance and the persecution of Jews

Part III: The European dimension

12. Legislation against Jews in Europe: A comparison
13. Divided societies: Popular input to the persecution of Jews
14. Beyond legislation: Non-German policies of violence
15. In the labyrinths of persecution: Survival attempts
16. Conclusion: Group destruction in extremely violent societies

The Holocaust, that is to say its major events, is basically covered in Part I (140 pages), so we will focus on that. Parts II and III deal with other topics.

Imagined Solutions

Gerlach starts with the situation before 1933. In a sub-chapter titled “Imagined ‘Solutions’” he writes:

“It is often said that everybody should have known before 1933 that Hitler and the Nazis wanted to destroy the Jews. However, relevant documents do not make this so obvious. According to the 1920 program of the Nazi Party, which was later declared ‘unchangeable,’ Jews should be stripped of their German citizenship, all Jews should be legally regarded as foreigners, and, as such, Germans should have priority over them with regard to employment, with the suggestion of a possible option to expel Jewish competitors. Jews were to be removed from the civil service, from journalism and from ownership of journals and newspapers; all immigration was to be outlawed and all immigrants (not just Jews) arriving after August 2, 1914, were to be expelled. [...] In his book, Mein Kampf, Hitler did not explicitly say that he wanted to kill the Jews. His likening of Jews to vermin on several occasions was suggestive of this fact, but not unheard of in German anti-Jewish discourse.” (p. 33)

He also notes:

“German activists were not alone in wanting to evict Jews from their country or from all of Europe. A number of public figures in Europe advocated this. In fact, some intellectuals had imagined removing all Jews from Europe since the late eighteenth century. Paul de Lagarde seems to have been the first – in the late 1800s – to suggest Madagascar explicitly as a possible destination, a thought that became widespread later and was taken up by the Nazis in 1940–41. By the 1930s, however, many other Jewish settlement areas were being discussed.” (p. 35)

And what was the policy after 1933?

“If there was one overarching goal of the central authorities after 1933, it was emigration. All Jews were supposed to leave Germany, and actions in the country were supposed to serve that goal.” (p. 48)

After the outbreak of the war, that policy was changed. Resettlement instead of emigration was the new plan:

“Such thinking was not exclusively German. US, British, French, Polish and Japanese politicians suggested resettlement schemes. The Polish Prime Minister in exile, Władysław Sikorski, suggested the resettlement of 3.5 million Polish Jews to the British Foreign Minister, Anthony Eden, as late as in January 1942. Other

deportation destinations suggested were Alaska, Dutch Guyana and various other South American countries, Manchuria, Angola, Ethiopia, Northern Rhodesia and the Philippines. Jewish emigration to Palestine added to the territorial resettlement options. During the Evian conference, Polish and Romanian diplomats urged President Roosevelt of the US (unsuccessfully) to include the emigration of their Jewish nationals in the work of the Intergovernmental Committee on Political Refugees.” (p. 60)

So far, so good. But when and how did this change to total extermination?

The Road to Extermination

Gerlach describes the evolution of the Nazi policy on the Jews as follows:

“Within one-and-a-half years, from the spring of 1941 to the late summer of 1942, the imaginations about schemes for the territorial concentration of the Jews came to include more and more violence combined with ideas for the selective mass murder of Jews in the Soviet Union that was to be occupied. This led to intentions to kill virtually all Soviet Jews; to which were then added plans to murder those Polish Jews who were regarded as unproductive, until, finally, the plan to kill all European Jews by 1943 was developed. Such policies came about through a complex process involving different central and regional authorities and agencies – at different levels of their hierarchies – and were the result of a number of intertwined motives. Practice evolved accordingly, though in regionally uneven ways – from selective mass shootings to almost complete annihilation in the occupied Soviet territories in 1941, though in some regions large numbers of Jews were spared for a year or longer; and from selective deportations from many countries to newly built extermination centers; and then the almost complete wiping out of Jewish communities in 1942.” (p. 66)

According to Gerlach, the Nazi system was “semi-decentralized and permitted a good deal of flexibility, informal coordination and autonomy” (p. 119). He concludes:

“Historians have paid much attention to this German decision-making process, and to changes in anti-Jewish policies. Following decades of research it has become clear that there was no Nazi master plan from the beginning and that decision-making was a complex and drawn-out process involving many actors at many levels.” (p. 438)

Hence in short, Gerlach is basically in line with Hilberg. There was no central plan, no budget, no special agency to exterminate the Jews. There were “ideas”, “intentions”, “complex processes”, “different regional authorities and agencies”, “intertwined motives” and “many actors”. If all this sounds confusing, it’s because it is.

Hitler’s Decision

Nevertheless, there had to be some sort of decision by Hitler to kill **all** of the European Jews. Indeed, in his sub-chapter “Hitler’s decision in principle to kill all of the European Jews” Gerlach informs us that:

“As a batch of documents shows, Hitler announced his decision in principle to murder all of Europe’s Jews on or around December 12, 1941.” (p. 80)

But the reader will wait in vain for Gerlach to produce this “batch” (in his footnotes actually he cites mostly authors, not documents). Instead, he quotes the following entry from Goebbels’s diary:

“Regarding the Jewish question the Führer is determined to clear the table. He warned the Jews that if they were to cause another world war, it would lead to their own destruction. Those were not empty words. Now the world war has come. The destruction of the Jews must be its necessary consequence. We cannot be sentimental about it.” (ibid.)

Of course, Gerlach keeps silent about later entries which explain what Goebbels meant by destruction, like the one on December 14, 1941:

“I speak with the Führer regarding the Jewish Question. He is determined to take consistent action and not be deterred by bourgeois sentimentality. Above all, the Jews must leave the Reich.”

Or that on February 5, 1942:

“The Jewish Question is again giving us a headache; this time, however, not because we have gone too far, but because we are not going far enough. Among large sections of the German people the idea is gaining headway that the Jewish Question cannot be regarded as solved until all Jews have left the Reich.”

Looking for some hard evidence, we move on to the sub-chapter “Toward a plan for swift, direct extermination” where we read:

“Hitler’s decision in principle did not immediately lead to mass murder or the erection of new extermination centers. The infamous Wannsee conference of January 20, 1942 – a high-level interagency meeting about the persecution of Jews – sheds light on why not. It provides insights into the structures of the political process. But because the conference does not fit well with many historians’ periodizations, some have been embarrassed by it and have concluded as a result that it was not very important.” (p. 84)

Fortunately, Gerlach is here to save the day. He continues:

“At the conference Heydrich presented only vague plans for ‘combing out Europe from West to East,’ bringing the captured Jews to eastern Europe, letting most of them die during transport and forced labor, and then killing the rest.” (p. 85)

Unfortunately, there is no mention of killings in the Wannsee Protocol. The only words that appear are expulsion and emigration. Gerlach knows this, so he does not quote anything from it. In fact, the passage he refers to says:

“In the course of the practical execution of the final solution, Europe will be combed through from west to east. Germany proper, including the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, will have to be handled first due to the housing problem and additional social and political necessities. The evacuated Jews will first be sent, group by group, to so-called transit ghettos, from which they will be transported to the East.”

Casualties through labor are mentioned in the preceding passage:

“Under proper guidance, in the course of the final solution the Jews are to be allocated for appropriate labor in the East. Able-bodied Jews, separated according to sex, will be taken in large work columns to these areas for work on roads, in the course of which action doubtless a large portion will be eliminated by natural causes. The possible final remnant will, since it will undoubtedly consist of the most resistant

portion, have to be treated accordingly, because it is the product of natural selection and would, upon release (bei Freilassung), act as the seed of a new Jewish revival."

Despite what the historians would like us to believe, there is no plan for mass murder here. The text actually refers only to able-bodied Jews who will manage to survive the harsh conditions, and upon release, help in the Jewish revival. So, they must be kept detained, not killed.

Gerlach furthermore writes:

"Josef Bühler, the State Secretary of the General Government, and Alfred Meyer, the Deputy Minister for the occupied Soviet territories, called for the extermination to be carried out first in their territories because – as one of Bühler's remarks was summed up, 'motives of labor policy would not impede the course of this action.'" (ibid.)

Here's what the Protocol actually says about Bühler:

"State Secretary Dr. Buehler stated that the General Government would welcome it if the final solution of this problem could be begun in the General Government, since on the one hand transportation does not play such a large role here nor would problems of labor supply hamper this action. Jews must be removed from the territory of the General Government as quickly as possible, since it is especially here that the Jew as an epidemic carrier represents an extreme danger and on the other hand he is causing permanent chaos in the economic structure of the country through continued black market dealings."

It is clear that Gerlach is misleading the reader by cherry picking phrases and stitching them together in his extermination scenario, a tactic much favored by Holocaust historians. Even worse, he does not hesitate to resort to indirect falsifications. For example:

"On July 19 Himmler ordered that the only Jews remaining in the General Government by the end of the year should be confined in five large labor camps. This was necessary, he argued, for the 'separation of races and peoples necessary for a new order in Europe,' for security reasons, and because Jews were a 'moral and physical source of infection.'" (p. 91)

That order was directed at SS Obergruppenführer Krüger and it says (NO-5574):

"I herewith order that the resettlement of the entire Jewish population of the General Government be carried out and completed by December 31, 1942. From December 31, 1942, no persons of Jewish origin may remain within the General Government, unless they are in concentration camps in Warsaw, Cracow, Czestochowa, Radom, and Lublin. All other work on which Jewish labor is employed must be finished by that date, or, in the event that this is not possible, it must be transferred to one of the concentration camps."

But a few pages later referring to the same order Gerlach writes:

"On July 19, 1942, Himmler had ordered that all of the Jews in the General Government were either to be murdered or brought to SS camps by December 31." (p. 107)

The underlined text is a sly addition by Gerlach. He uses the same trick a little further on with another order by Himmler on June 21, 1943. The order says (NO-2403):

"1) I order that all Jews still remaining in ghettos in the Ostland area be collected in concentration camps. 2) I prohibit the withdrawal of Jews from concentration camps for [outside] work from August 1, 1943. 3) A concentration camp is to be built near Riga to which will be transferred the entire manufacture of clothing and equipment now operated by the Wehrmacht outside. All private firms will be eliminated. The workshops are to be solely concentration camp workshops. The Chief of the SS Economic and Administrative Main Office is requested to see to it that there will be no shortfall in the production required by the Wehrmacht as the result of this reorganization. 4) Inmates of the Jewish ghettos who are not required are to be evacuated to the East. 5) As many male Jews as possible are to be taken to the concentration camp in the oil-shale area for the mining of oil-shale. 6) The date set for the reorganization of the concentration camps is August 1, 1943."

And here's what Gerlach claims:

"On June 21 he ordered that all of the ghettos in Reich Commissariat Ostland be emptied by August 1 and that a certain proportion of their inhabitants be killed, with the rest transferred to concentration camps." (p. 110)

Needless to say, no source is given.

The Death Camps

Surprisingly, in a book about the Holocaust, the death camps rarely appear. There is a very brief description about the killing operations in Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka (p. 92), and a few other references like this:

"Under direct German administration the removal of German, Austrian and Czech Jews, including many of those in Theresienstadt, was largely completed by August 1943. Most of these were murdered at Auschwitz. Repeatedly, the Jews remaining in Polish and Soviet territories occupied by Germany were sorted according to skill or ability to work. Large numbers were killed in the process and the rest were gradually moved to camps. Most of the ghettos were dissolved." (p. 102)

Or this:

"Large-scale deportations started on May 15, 1944, only two months after the German invasion, and 430,000 Hungarian Jews were shipped to Auschwitz within just eight weeks; about 75% were killed immediately upon arrival." (p. 114)

Or this:

"The first murders in the gas chambers at Belzec started in March 1942, targeting Jews from the districts of Lublin and Galicia. They were designed to kill people unfit for work – about 60% of the population, excluding those aged between sixteen and thirty-five years old." (p. 243)

There is also a table with some basic information (p. 120). Gerlach lists five of the six death camps (he leaves Majdanek out), their area of responsibility, the murder method, the construction date, the operation period, and the numbers and origins of Jews killed. And that's all. No details, no photos and of course, no witnesses. He merely quotes books written either by himself or by similar historians, such as Berger, Browning, Pohl, Schelvis and Tuchel.

Gerlach has a response for this (well, sort of):

“Why does this book not analyze methods of violence or killing in more detail? The comparison of violence against a variety of groups suggests caution for the following reasons. First, a wide array of forms of violence were applied to the same group (for example, the Jews in Ukraine). Second, the same method of violence was used against different groups (for example, disabled people, Jews, Soviet POWs, Roma and Polish and Soviet political opponents were all gassed). Third, the same unit or individual might use various methods of violence. Also, inasmuch as people other than those in the killing units determined who was to be killed or deported, and when, the ways in which the killings occurred do not explain the events. All this implies that the methods of violence employed do not necessarily say much about the relationship between perpetrator and victim, and do little to explain why an act of violence took place.” (p. 140)

But before explaining why something happened, we must know what exactly happened. Unfortunately, the author does not help, most probably for reasons very different than those stated.

Summary

This book should have been titled *The Persecution of the European Jews*, as very little space is devoted to the extermination part (not even the word Zyklon appears), and that part is also quite confusing. Gerlach uses the usual tricks employed by Holocaust historians: Cherry picking, suppression of evidence, omissions, falsifications. But he puts forth an interesting question:

“Why did so few oppose mass extermination? It is true that the authorities did not announce the destruction publicly, and that most people within Germany heard only rumors, snippets of information or the claims broadcast on enemy radio stations. In the occupied countries, however – where most of the mass murder took place – the widespread, active support and almost total lack of opposition is remarkable. Fully explaining this remains a task for future research.” (p. 446)

For revisionists the answer is easy: There was no mass extermination to oppose. But for orthodox historians, well, good luck with that.

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